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ABSTRACT

The development of modern planning theories and strategies, as applied to higher education, has been both contentious and inconsistent. Planning originated as a management function and responsibility, but by the 1960s, analysts, statisticians, and strategists were providing the rationales for the major planning decisions. The inflexibility of rational planning to change led to its discredit in the following decade and by the early 1980s, strategic planning was in the forefront of planning theory. The ongoing challenge for planners has been to find a balance among the intuition, judgments, values, and analytic processes necessary for effective decision-making and to make the planning climate congenial to creative, conceptual, and enthusiastic thinking. Planners have had to concede that planning must be recursive rather than a linear sequential activity, and that change requires structural rather than merely incremental responses. Higher education has experimented with a number of planning approaches intended to introduce more quantifiable data into decision-making processes, including management-by-objectives and zero-based budgeting, but the complexity and time-intensity of these approaches, as well as their unsuitability to academic culture, have limited their success. A successful organizational strategy should focus on quality improvement but also accept discontinuity as a fact of organizational life. Specifically, such a strategy should create foresight, develop scenarios to help groups think about the future, promote leadership, assume that quality is the goal, and maintain flexibility. Contains 33 references. (TGI)

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A FUNNY THING HAPPENED ON THE WAY TO THE FUTURE:

REGENERATING OUR ACADEMIC INSTITUTIONS

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Biography

Ken Robson has been an instructor and department chair in English, and for the past eight years has been a dean at Mount Royal College in Calgary, Alberta. He has extensive practical experience in planning, budgeting and negotiations. He is a facilitator for the NCCCA's Institute for Academic Leadership Development, and he is a contributing editor of *Academic Leadership*. He is currently on leave at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln where he is enrolled in the doctoral program in higher education leadership.

A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Future: Regenerating Our Academic Institutions

Introduction

This paper discusses the relationship of strategy formation and planning formulation to change as it applies to organizations and, especially, to institutions of higher education. The paper provides an account of the "muddle" of planning theory and practice; its precarious status in education; and the current state of its development and application. The paper concludes with some practical suggestions for implementing an effective strategic planning process in higher education. This discussion is timely because the speed and scope of change are forcing upon even the least foresightful of organizations the imperative of developing a coping strategy. As we shall discover in what follows, those who cannot imagine the future may not have one.

In the Muddle of Planning

Future generations interested in our little portion of history will no doubt be fascinated by our preoccupation with change--still so novel to us--and our various ingenious strategies for contending with it, controlling it, and consenting to it. Among the artifacts they will undoubtedly examine will be the extensive literature on planning which constitutes our unique contribution to the art and science of anticipating and predicting the future.

The development of modern planning theory and application has been both contentious and inconsistent. Each new announcement of a breakthrough in planning, it seems, has been countered by an admission of a breakdown. While views of the efficacy of various planning theories differ considerably (Mintzberg, 1994), there is general agreement on the stages of planning's development dating back to the 1950s (Norris and Poulton, 1987). Planning originated as a management function and responsibility. Those "in the know" were considered best able to chart the course for the entire operation. In a variant on Warren Bennis's oft-quoted aphorism, managers were assumed not only to do the right things, but to do them right. That, presumably, is why they had been promoted into their positions of authority.

These managers had a propensity to manage by fiat rather than by consensus. Therefore, when they eventually required assistance in dealing with the growing complexity of their organizations, they turned, not to their employees, but to "experts." By the 1960s a veritable phalanx of analysts, statisticians, and strategists were providing the rationales for the major planning decisions. These were the halcyon days for managers and planners who oversaw the steady growth of their organizations by calmly extrapolating from the past in order to secure the future. Managers and planners constituted a self-supporting system based upon the rational analysis of observable data. What they would soon discover, however, is that what they did not know would hurt them.

The 1970s brought the first wrenching dislocations which have since become ubiquitous in our environment. The OPEC-induced oil crisis signalled the death of the illusion of steady and predictable growth, and with it the presumptions of the rational planning model as it had been conceived in the previous two decades. As early as 1973, one of planning's most percipient critics, Aaron Wildavsky entitled an article, "If Planning is Everything, Maybe it's Nothing," and concluded his indictment of formal planning by claiming that "planning is not so much a subject for the social scientist as for the theologian" (153).

Planning became a discredited activity for many reasons, but principally because it remained obdurate in the face of change. It became so convinced of its rational prowess that it could not see its own fundamental irrationality. As the political philosopher Michael Oakeshott has noted, rationalism is "without the power to correct its own shortcomings; it has no homeopathic quality; you cannot escape its errors by becoming more sincerely or more profoundly rationalistic" (quoted in Mintzberg, 1994, 151). The inflexibility of rational planning made it one of the early and conspicuous casualties of the change process. By the early 1980s, however, planning was attempting a comeback as "strategic planning." In his editorial to a special issue of Long Range Planning (June, 1983) devoted to the ailments of planning, Ian Wilson asserted that planning "is [now] moving away from the spurious certainty of 'single-point future' forecasting toward a frank recognition of the uncertainties inherent in structural change. It believes more in the diffusion of strategic thinking throughout the organization than in the narrow channeling of strategic planning through specialist staffs" (3).

The dilemma for planners and for managers who rely upon their analyses is that, by its very nature, planning is an act of decomposition. Wholes are divided into their parts for purposes of analysis and are then later recombined in the form of a "plan." The difficulty arises when the newly created whole is not only less than the sum of its parts, but is not even an accurate representation of them. Therefore, the ongoing challenge for planners has been to find "a balance...among the intuition, judgments, values and analytical processes of decision-making in planning so that the planning climate may be congenial to creative, conceptual, enthusiastic thinking" (Steiner, 1983). This process is what Henry Mintzberg refers to as "planning on the left side, managing on the right" (1989).

Rational planning, then, which had been in the ascendant in the decades following World War II, was in retreat through the 1970s, and began slowly to regroup around the idea of strategic planning in the 1980s. Rational planning had been too much concerned with tactics, or how to get things done, but had hardly been concerned with strategy, or what needs to be done. Planners had had to concede that planning must be a recursive rather than a linear sequential activity, and that change now requires structural rather than merely incremental responses. Having absorbed these painful lessons, planners proceeded to shift their focus to strategic issues. Before considering the current state of the theory and practice of strategic planning, however, it would be useful to consider how this "muddle" has affected higher education.

Applying Lipstick to a Pig

It would be a gross understatement to say that higher education has been resistant to planning. Nor are the reasons difficult to identify. The rapid growth of higher education immediately following World War II set institutional agendas across the nation. Resources flowed to institutions to accommodate their burgeoning growth. What systematic planning did occur tended to focus on the size of the increment necessary to accommodate rising demand. However, a deeper and more profound reason for higher education's resistance to planning can be found in its very nature. American colleges and universities are loosely coupled, open systems with multiple and poorly defined goals, unclear links between means and ends, political decision-making processes, and relatively autonomous, professionally staffed subunits that often cannot or will not carry out activities suggested, or even mandated, by institutional-level

administrators (Cohen and March, 1974; Birnbaum, 1988; Schmidtlein & Milton, 1989).

Higher education has experimented with a number of planning approaches intended to introduce more quantifiable data into decision-making processes. Dating back to the late 1960s and 1970s a number of government supported initiatives, notably the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS), and privately sponsored projects such as the Exxon Education Foundation's Resource Allocation Management Program and the Ford Foundation's Program for Research in University Administration attempted to develop the tools and techniques required for planning and allocation decisions. In addition, numerous other highly structured planning and management processes were advocated. These included Planning, Programming, Budgeting Systems (PPBS), Management by Objectives (MBO), and Zero-Based Budgeting (ZBB) (Schmidtlein & Milton, 1989). However, the experience with these systems was, for the most part, highly unsatisfactory. Among the major reasons for their failure were their complexity and time-intensity, their unsuitability to the organizational culture, and the perceived mismatch between the promise of planning and its performance. Compounding these problems was the relative abundance of resources which tended to make planning a lower order institutional priority. As one observer put it, the job of the finance division was to go and get the funds, and the job of the academic division was to spend them.

Not surprisingly, then, in their seminal study of presidential leadership, Cohen and March (1974) devote only four pages to the role of planning and their conclusion is that, while presidents pay lip service to the need for planning, they barely engage in the activity. In summarizing their results, Cohen and March listed four typical responses to their questions about planning:

1. Yes, we have a plan. It is used in capital project and physical location decisions.
2. Yes, we have a plan. Here it is. It was made during the administration of our last president. We are working on a new one.
3. No, we do not have a plan. We should. We are working on one.
4. I think there's a plan around here someplace. Miss Jones, do we have a copy of our comprehensive 10-year plan. (113)

Consistent with their view of universities as "organized anarchies," Cohen and March saw planning as far less an instrumental activity than a public relations exercise. This view is reflected in the four roles they ascribe to planning: symbol, advertisement, game, and excuse for interaction. It is small wonder, then, that they propose that presidential leadership be based upon "sensible foolishness."

Cohen and March's theory of academic indeterminacy has continued to influence the way many people within and outside of higher education view the enterprise. By the early 1980s, however, in response to dramatic changes in its environment, higher education began to explore alternatives to its customary manner of operating. In a work that has remained a standard reference on academic planning, George Keller (1983) warned that "a specter is haunting higher education: the specter of decline and bankruptcy" (3). Keller's message provided cold comfort to higher education. His litany of the ills besetting this most stable of all organizations pointed to the urgent need to shake off the complacency that had overtaken higher education. In particular, he criticized higher education's lack of strong leadership, its inattention to financial management, and the absence of a strategy informed by developments outside of individual institutions.

Keller's treatment plan for higher education included three prescriptions: a renewed emphasis upon management; the development of a comprehensive academic strategy along the lines developed by the Boston Consulting Group; and a revitalized governance process. Despite his stern warning about the failing health of higher education, Keller remained confident that the will and the way would be found to avert the catastrophe that awaited the system if it would not or could not change. In an obvious rebuke to the "organized anarchy" proponents, Keller concluded that "the transformation of American higher education from "garbage can" administration to strategic management is under way" (177).

Saying it does not necessarily make it so, however, as subsequent developments would demonstrate. In retrospect, the 1980s can best be viewed as a period of transition in academic planning. Despite his early confidence that a groundswell of change was under way, Keller sounded more cautious in a later interview. Among the lessons he claimed to have learned in the intervening period was that "strategic planning works best when either crisis or lust is present (AAHE Bulletin, 1988, 5). The message is clear: unless circumstances force changes upon institutions, they will persist in their slow, incremental adaptation to their environment.

In subsequent articles (1989; 1994) Keller has continued to emphasize the significance of the changes affecting higher education, and has pointed to his earlier solutions as still being the most effective means for institutions to respond to the need to plan for change. However, while his basic argument still has considerable merit, particular features are less persuasive. For example, he tends to subscribe to the "great man" theory of leadership (and his examples are all men); he disregards the potential impact of the quality movement, especially in what it implies for empowerment and continuous improvement; his planning model is static rather than dynamic, and it fails to include processes for creating a vision or for revising the strategy. Finally, his proposal for a revitalized governance system in the form of Joint Big Decision Committees (JBDCs) has met with only limited success to date (Yamada, 1991; Corak, 1992; Schuster, Smith, Corak, & Yamada, 1994).

After a decade of turbulence in higher education, and after considerable research into "how colleges work," the 1980s failed to produce a consensus regarding how best to cope with the accelerating forces of change. In fact, just as the decade had opened with Keller's rationalist challenge to the relativism of Cohen and March, the decade ended with a succession of works by Robert Birnbaum whose research supported the earlier view of colleges and universities as "organized anarchies." In such an environment getting even a majority to agree to a single course of action is like trying to apply lipstick to a pig. You are apt to miss the mark and make a mess in the process. In his influential How Colleges Work (1988), Birnbaum devotes less than a page to planning and dismisses Keller's notion of developing a purposeful academic strategy. In a related publication (1991), Birnbaum takes issue with Keller's prediction that JBDCs will lead to more rational and planned decisions in higher education.

The views of these two writers could not be more divergent. Whereas Birnbaum views colleges and universities as anarchies which are nevertheless organized at a deeper level, Keller appears to view them as inherently rational enterprises which have become disorganized largely through a failure in leadership. While, arguably, the debate between these two opposing positions has yet to be resolved in favor of one or the other, the outlines of the respective positions and the consequences of each are becoming much clearer as higher education proceeds through the 1990s.

Beyond Chaos

The pace of change has so accelerated that even the most reluctant of organizations have had to develop strategies for coping with radical discontinuities in their environment (Cameron &Tschirhart, 1992; Massy& Meyerson, 1992; Dill, 1994). The forces of globalization, miniaturization, and competition, to mention but a few change agents, are leading to a greater convergence between private and public enterprises. Businesses are becoming learning organizations while colleges and universities are becoming competitive. Both are looking for ways to generate greater energy and innovation in their organizations, and both are focused upon serving their customers better. Despite some arguments to the contrary (Mintzberg, 1989, 1994), the ways that business and higher education are responding to the challenges posed by rapid change are coming to resemble one another more and more. While their new strategies for dealing with the ever present uncertainties within their environment are continuing to evolve, some discernible features are beginning to emerge.

In Competing for the Future (1994) Hamel and Prahalad explain how corporations responded to adverse economic conditions first by restructuring, then by reengineering, and finally by regenerating or reinventing themselves. The distinctions are by no means trivial. In the restructuring phase organizations implemented strategies to downsize, and thereby became smaller and more efficient. In the reengineering phase organizations implemented process improvement strategies, the most common of which was Total Quality Management, and thereby became better and more effective. While restructuring and reengineering strategies may be necessary for survival, however, they may not be sufficient. Successful organizations in the future will have to look beyond these strategies for ways to regenerate or reinvent themselves, and thereby differentiate themselves from their competitors. As necessary as they are, restructuring and reengineering may focus an organization on perfecting the present rather than creating the future.

There are two tendencies in organizations today which, while highly beneficial in themselves, may result in being counterproductive if they are allowed merely to run their courses. One is the search for excellence through continuous improvement, and the other is thriving on chaos. The danger is that the former can lead to the busy fixer syndrome in which discreet parts of the organization are improved, but in the absence of a larger purpose and design. This is essentially the point made by the author of a recent ASQC publication (Barry, 1994). The index contains no fewer than eighty-two separate references to strategy in only ninety-nine pages of text. There is also a danger, however, in adopting chaos as one's guide because it places one in a reactive mode and can stifle more creative visions of the future. Organizations need to focus on quality improvement, but cannot risk becoming lost in the details of their operation. Similarly, they need to accept discontinuity as a fact of organizational life, but they cannot risk becoming overwhelmed by it. In short, organizations require a strategy which enables them to position themselves to succeed in the future.

The general features of that strategy are beginning to take shape in the work of several individuals who have spent considerable time studying organizations. The new concept of strategy draws upon Mintzberg's idea of an emerging strategy formation which is highly intuitive and opposed to the typical reductive formulation of plans. It also draws upon Michael Porter's influential work on "positioning" by creating flexible scenarios which enable organizations to respond quickly and efficiently to changes in their environment. Finally, it draws extensively

upon Hamel and Prahalad's work on "core competencies" upon which to build a "strategic architecture" (a term they use deliberately to capture the combination of the imaginative and practical skills of the dreamer and draftsperson). A successful architectural structure can serve to embody the aspirations of its inhabitants and to shelter them from the elements. So, too, can a strategic architecture serve these dual purposes.

Among the features of a successful organizational strategy, there are five that are of particular importance:

Create Foresight

There must be an animating vision. It need not emanate from and should not reside solely in the leader of an organization, but the leader has to be involved in its development and must be its greatest champion. Foresight and vision are as much about discovery as deciding, and as much about direction as destination. (Senge, 1990; Schwartz, 1991; Nanus, 1992; Hamel & Prahalad, 1994)

Develop Scenarios

One particularly useful means for stimulating a group's thinking about its vision of the future is the development of scenarios. Their purpose is to provide plausible alternative futures for an organization. They serve to stimulate thought, not predict action. Effective scenarios function like "memories of the future." (Wack, 1985a & b; Porter, 1985; Senge, Kleimer, Roberts, Ross, & Smith, 1994)

Promote Leadership

Leadership, especially in higher education, must be shared to be fully effective. Leaders of major change processes, however, may find themselves having to draw upon a fuller repertoire of leadership skills than leaders who are content to preside over incremental change processes. While delegation and empowerment are essential to animating the vision, leaders must take a major role in guiding the process. (Bass & Avolio, 1994)

Assume Quality

There is no point in embarking upon a visionary journey with inadequate equipment and supplies. Successful organizations will move beyond a view of quality as value-added and will make quality the sine qua non for competing effectively. Quality will become less and end in itself and more a means of ensuring that an organization has the means secure its future. Customers will expect quality and organizations will be forced to "compete on capability." (Seymour, 1992, 1995)

Maintain Flexibility

Whatever strategy is developed, it must maintain the flexibility to allow an organization to respond to changes as they occur. There is a fine line which separates the kind of strategy formation which is suggested here from the formulation of plans that restrict rather than enable change to occur. Fostering continuous learning as well as unlearning can help an organization to maintain the necessary flexibility it needs. It has to be on the lookout for new knowledge at the same time that it questions and occasionally discards old knowledge so that it does not become trapped by outmoded thinking. (Senge, 1990; Hamel and Prahalad, 1994)

This paper has argued that planning has been dominated for too long by narrowly prescriptive and reductionist approaches which served more to limit thinking than to stimulate

it. It has argued as well that colleges and universities have been particularly resistant to planning but that circumstances of scarce resources and an uncertain future are forcing them to reconsider their position. Finally, by drawing upon recent developments in the planning literature, this paper has advocated a form of strategic planning which relies extensively upon creating an animating vision, developing plausible futures, promoting active leadership, ensuring that quality exists, and maintaining a flexible stance towards planning. Not everyone will agree on the need for a future-oriented strategy, but it is becoming increasingly clear in both business and education that those who cannot imagine the future may not have one.

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